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# **Traditional community houses of the Co-tu ethnic group in central Vietnam**

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to explore the current state of the traditional community houses belonging to the Co-tu ethnic group in central Vietnam. In the past, a community house functioned as a site for common activities and was a cultural symbol for most Co-tu villages. The community house was typically constructed by all the villagers, led by elders possessing traditional expertise and indigenous knowledge. However, the living conditions of ethnic communities and the customs relating to housing and settlement have undergone changes in accordance with Vietnamese government policy. In addition, many community houses of varying styles and construction have been built recently with the assistance of organizations based within and outside Vietnam. The paper presents a case study of a community house in Thua Thien Hue province that was built with the support of university researchers. It illustrates the complexity of the task and the challenges and lessons learned from the collaborative construction of a traditional community house.

## **Keywords**

Ethnic minorities, Co-tu, Vietnam, traditional community house.

## **1. Introduction**

Vietnam is a country of more than 86 million people (General Statistical Office of Vietnam 2008: 9). Over 70 percent of its population is agrarian, with livelihoods based on agricultural cultivation and production, forestry and aquaculture in rural areas (GSO 2006a: 60-61). The ethnic composition of Vietnam is diverse, officially comprising 54 ethnic groups. Kinh, the main ethnic group in Vietnam, accounts for 87 percent of the population and the remaining 13 percent comprises 53 ethnic minority groups. Historically, the ethnic minorities have resided predominantly in the country's upland region and their lifestyles and cultures are traditionally suited to life in mountainous areas.

While the country's heterogeneous population has been described by Vietnamese scholars as "a beautiful multi-colored textile mosaic," all 54 ethnic groups have different characteristics rooted in their cultural and social backgrounds (Nguyen Van Huy 2004: 5). Ethnic minorities retain many of their traditional values and one of the most important

traditions of the Co-tu ethnic group is that of constructing and maintaining a community house. Although other ethnic groups also traditionally built community houses, the Co-tu community house has been widely recognized for its aesthetic qualities and cultural significance. In the past, most Co-tu villagers used this building as a place for community activities such as meetings, leisure and ritual ceremonies. Co-tu villagers constructed their community houses from local materials using indigenous knowledge, passed down through the generations. It should be noted that Co-tu community houses have exhibited great diversity. Not only have their features and functions differed according to the region and locale but, in recent years, there has been great change and diversification in construction methods and building styles. These extensive changes make it difficult to clearly define a “traditional community house”. For the purposes of this paper, however, the author defines “traditional community house” in terms of 1) architectural form,<sup>1</sup> 2) materials used and 3) methods of construction.

First, in terms of form, a traditional community house is a thatch-roofed house that is curved at each side and constructed on piles. The house features a rectangular or oval-shaped floor from which a wooden frame connects with the symbolic main pillar, which stands at the center of the house and reaches up to the roof. Second, a traditional community house should be constructed of natural materials sourced locally. The choice of natural materials depends on the location and region but includes timber, rattan and bamboo. However, many modern community houses are made from contemporary materials such as concrete and brick. Third, a traditional community house should be built by local people without assistance from carpenters or construction teams from outside the area. In the past, local people depended on their own experience and indigenous knowledge and did not need to use architectural drawings. Village elders typically took a leadership role, discussing and making plans and constructing and maintaining the building using age-old techniques.

After the war and conflict of the 1960s and 1970s and the rapid economic growth that followed, Vietnam has undergone a period of rapid change. This has affected the natural environment, people’s perspectives, culture and traditions, and their access to information. Many urban dwellers – mostly from the Kinh ethnic group – live contemporary lifestyles as a result of economic growth. However, the livelihoods of the ethnic groups living in mountainous areas have not improved at the same rate, presenting challenges for the government and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that provide development assistance. One increasingly common example of such assistance is the construction of a community house, which serves traditional and symbolic functions for Co-tu communities. This paper aims to describe some of the current characteristics of traditional Co-tu community houses in central Vietnam and to discuss community house construction by local and external stakeholders based on a search of the literature available, interviews and a case study. The first section of this paper contains an overview of traditional Co-tu community houses, including their specific cultural features, and explains how their construction has

been affected by government policy and the intervention of aid organizations. The second section focuses on one community house constructed in central Vietnam. This section provides a detailed description and examination of the process of constructing a community house. Although this example is not necessarily typical of most Co-tu communities, it can serve as a detailed description of the process by which a community house is built by local residents with outside assistance.

## **2. Traditional community houses of the Co-tu ethnic group**

### **2.1. The Co-tu ethnic group and the community house**

The Co-tu is one of 21 ethnic minority groups belonging to the Mon Khmer language group in Vietnam (Dang Nghiem Van et al. 2000: 2). The Co-tu population in Vietnam totals approximately 37,000 people, most of whom live in mountainous areas of Quang Nam and Thua Thien Hue provinces in central Vietnam (ibid. 2-3, 271; Nguyen Van Huy 2004: 51; Nguyen Van Huy et al. 2009: 34). Traditionally, at the center of every Co-tu village was a community house, called a *guol*<sup>2</sup> in the Co-tu language. A *guol* has been characterized as the symbol of the village and as a valuable cultural property by researchers writing in both English and Vietnamese<sup>3</sup> (Le Anh Tuan 2002; Luu Hung 2007; Nguyen Phuoc Bao Dan 2001; 2003; Nguyen Van Son 2003). Luu Hung describes the community house as follows:

The *guol* is usually built in the center of the settlement area, thus confirming its central role in the social and spiritual life of the village. It is always the biggest, tallest and most beautiful house in the village – its “face”, “soul” and “pride” (2007: 51).

The *guol* is also described as the “architectural and artistic product of the whole village” (Luu Hung 2007: 51). Villagers customarily build their own community house by themselves, without requesting assistance from outsiders. Village patriarchs play an especially important role in formulating plans and in the construction of the community house. Villagers rely on the expertise of elders and the transmitted knowledge of past generations to build community houses without recourse to any type of architectural drawings (Nguyen Xuan Hong 2008: 118). Therefore, the building of a community house requires and perpetuates the knowledge of traditional architectural skills passed down from generation to generation.

### **2.2. Features of a community house**

Figure 1 shows two Co-tu community houses in Thua Thien Hue province in central Vietnam – the first (shown left) in Thuong Long commune, Nam Dong district, and the second (shown center and right) in Hong Ha commune in A Luoi district. There are many types of Co-tu community houses but they share many common features. These thatch-roofed buildings are rounded on each side and are set 6-7 m above the ground on wooden piles. They have a



Figure 1. Co-tu community house in Thuong Long (left); central pillar (centre) and pole for buffalo sacrifices (right) in Hong Ha community house

rectangular or oval-shaped floor that is connected by a wooden frame to a central main pillar that extends to the roof. One of the specific features of the Co-tu community house is its main pillar, which distinguishes it from the community house of other ethnic groups such as the Ba-na and Xo-dang in the central highlands of Vietnam (center, Figure 1). This main pillar at the center of the house is often carved with images of animals (Luu Hung 2007: 51-52; Vietnam News Agency 2009: 7). For the Co-tu people, the central pillar symbolizes the prestige of their hamlet and its leader. Therefore, the bigger and more beautiful the center pillar, the more prestigious the community. Another interesting feature of the *guol* is the ornate pole for buffalo sacrifices (right, Figure 1). This pole, positioned in front of the house, is indispensable when Co-tu people sacrifice buffaloes to the gods during special occasions, such as the completion of a new house (Nguyen Xuan Hong 2008: 124-125).

### **2.3. Functions of a community house**

As many researchers have noted, the functions of a community house vary widely (Le Anh Tuan 2002; Luu Hung 2007; Murashita 2009; Nguyen Phuc Bao Dan 2003; Nguyen Van Son 2003). Murashita characterizes its historical functions in terms of three roles, based on Nguyen Xuan Hong's research on traditional community houses (2008: 125-131):

- 1) Social functions: living space/accommodation for single men and village leaders, and a space for sharing information among villagers and between elders and important guests from outside
- 2) Political functions: site for mediating disputes, preparing to fight enemies from other villages, and dispensing punishment
- 3) Cultural functions: used for cultural festivals with traditional songs and dances for good harvests, preparation for hunting wild animals and displaying their skulls, commemoration of victory in battle, exhibitions, and sharing indigenous knowledge and traditional stories, e.g. elders recounting legends and experiences and explaining customs to village youth (Murashita 2009: 26-29).

As this information suggests, the community house is used as a cultural and social space for local residents. Yet the role of the community house has changed recently. Le Anh Tuan compared past and present functions (2002) and concluded that a community house is no longer used as a living space for single men or for mediation of disputes. More commonly, it is now used as a place for holding training courses and for the meetings of local authorities and mass organizations. Nguyen Ngoc claimed that many community houses are currently used for meetings and as drinking venues but not for the cultural transmission of indigenous and traditional knowledge and therefore “have lost their sacredness” (Vietnam News Agency 2009: 7). In Con Don village, a very remote village in Quang Nam province, the local people formerly held cultural activities to commemorate cotton planting, rice planting and rice harvesting in the community house. Now, however, they only gather to celebrate a festival for rice harvesting, which also marks rice planting and cotton harvesting. This may also reflect a decline in local cotton production arising from the increased availability of inexpensive cloth at the market. According to the village head man, the house is often used instead to mark the national holidays set by the Vietnamese government, such as New Year’s Day, Labor Day and Women’s Day (Hanh, personal communication, May 7, 2009).

#### **2.4. Community houses in transition**

The above observations indicate that lifestyles and customs surrounding the community house have experienced change. A community house was a cultural symbol for most Co-tu villages and functioned as a site for common activities in the past. Although community houses were once built by local residents under the leadership of village elders, today a number of organizations have become involved such as the Vietnamese government and external aid agencies. Community houses have been highly influenced by many factors which will be explained in the section below.

The Vietnamese economy has grown remarkably in the years of economic and social reform since the government introduced the *doimoi* policy (economic changes promoting Vietnam’s transition to a market economy). People’s living standards – even those of ethnic minorities in remote rural areas – have improved as a result of nationwide development. However, the economic gap between urban and rural populations has been widening under *doimoi* economic policies and poverty remains a pressing problem, particularly in the country’s mountainous areas (GSO 2006b: 40; Japan Bank for International Cooperation 2001: 2-4). To achieve more balanced and equitable growth (and as a response to growing criticism from academics and the media) the government enacted Resolution 22, a policy promoting economic and social development in mountain areas, in 1989. Resolution 22 sets out preferential measures to assist ethnic minorities achieve economic development, while lauding the inherent value of their cultural traditions. It specifies measures that should be taken to support their development, spurring the implementation of several programs aimed at ethnic minorities (Ito 2008: 78-80).

One of these programs, Program 135, helped to realize the objectives of Resolution 22. The program had two phases, implemented in 1998-2005 and 2006-2010; the first phase involved six million people in more than 2,300 communes nationwide (ibid. 80-81, 95). The goal was to reduce the gap in poverty between rural and urban areas, while improving economic and social conditions of ethnic minorities living in remote mountainous communes. The communes targeted each received about 400 to 500 million VND annually (equivalent to approximately US\$30,000 in 2000), which they typically invested in local infrastructure such as improving roads, constructing schools and building community houses (ibid. 80-81). Local governments follow Resolution 22, which promotes cultural conservation, by supporting the construction of community houses as a physical symbol of ethnic identity. According to an officer in the Department of Culture of Nam Dong district in Thua Thien Hue province in 2009, the department decided to build community houses for all 66 villages in 10 communes in the district through Program 135. The district government allocated 100 million VND to building a traditional community house in each village. Almost all of them were built with modern materials but according to traditional designs and only two of them were constructed from local natural materials (Mr Luong Hien, personal communication, August 20, 2009). The case of the community house in Hien district in Quang Nam province, built using funds donated by Kinh individuals, is not uncommon: it was made of modern materials and, according to one official government newspaper account, “paid no heed to traditional style” (Vietnam News Agency 2009: 7).

Under the *doimoi* policy, the Vietnamese government started to receive increasing amounts of assistance from international donors in the 1990s. There were only a very limited number of international donors and NGOs operating in Vietnam in the 1970s and 1980s, even though the population was experiencing severe poverty at that time. International donors have funded many development projects in recent decades, although assistance for the central highlands, where many indigenous ethnic groups live, has trailed that for other regions and the government still maintains stringent restrictions on access by foreign visitors to minority villages. The biggest official development assistance (ODA) donor is Japan, followed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank. These two multilateral development finance institutions account for 76 percent of total disbursements. An example of construction assisted by the ADB is the community house built in 2008 in Ta Lu village, Thuong Nhat commune, Nam Dong district in Thua Thien Hue province.<sup>4</sup> ADB provided 250 million VND, which was used mainly to pay for materials and labor. An external construction team built the house in a traditional shape but used modern materials (see Figure 2).

A community house in Doi village, Thuong Lo commune, Nam Dong district in Thua Thien Hue province received construction assistance in 2005 from SNV, an international NGO working in Vietnam (see Figure 2). This is one of only two traditionally constructed community houses in Nam Dong district, which has 10 communes and 66 villages. SNV’s support was limited to providing 20 million VND, which villagers used to buy rope and



Figure 2. Community houses in the villages of Ta Lu (left) and Doi (right)

to cover part of the labor costs. Local residents built the house on their own, collecting construction materials and building under the guidance of elders. Since completion, it has been used as a site for ecotourism<sup>5</sup> but local young men often stay in the house overnight when it is not being used by tourists.

The upsurge in the construction of community houses has also been influenced by ecotourism initiatives, which have been a popular focus of development projects for the past decade. These aim to increase local revenues while promoting an area's cultural traditions and reducing degradation of the natural environment. Because "most potential ecotourist sites are inhabited by ethnic minorities" (Phan et al. 2002), greater efforts have been made to conserve minority architectural traditions.

This section has presented an overview of the current state of Co-tu community houses, describing the Co-tu ethnic group, community house features and functions and the changing conditions in Vietnam today. Clearly, the environment and community surrounding the community house have changed as they have been influenced by economic development and affected by the evolution of government policy towards ethnic minorities. In summary, although Co-tu people once saw their community houses as symbols of their cultural identity and built them using traditional techniques, in recent years many houses have been built with the help of Vietnamese government and international aid agencies.

### **3. Case study of a community house in Hong Ha**

This section focuses on a community house in Hong Ha commune, A Luoi district, Thua Thien Hue province to examine and illustrate in detail the building process. A traditional community house in Hong Ha was built in 2007 with the assistance of two academic institutions, the Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies (GSGES) of Kyoto University, Japan, and Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry (HUAF) in Vietnam.<sup>6</sup> House construction was one of several activities included in the GSGES-HUAF project, which ran for three years from September 2006 to August 2009 (Iizuka et al. 2008). GSGES and HUAF provided approximately 100 million VND to pay for timber and bamboo, labor and ceremonial activities. The house was constructed in four phases: 1) preparation



and discussions prior to building the community house, 2) the collection of materials, 3) construction, and 4) maintenance and management of the house and ritual ceremonies.

### **3.1. Overview of Hong Ha commune**

The construction of a traditional community house in the upland commune of Hong Ha was initiated as part of a larger research and development project in the Bo River watershed in Thua Thien Hue province, central Vietnam, by researchers from GSGES and HUAF. Hong Ha is a mountainous commune in A Luoi district, located 45 km southwest of Hue city. The commune is divided into five villages – Con Tom, Pa-hi, Can Sam, Paring and Arom – with a total population of 1,332 people (Thua Thien Hue Statistical Office 2007: 58). According to an officer of the commune People's Committee, the commune population in 2009 included 309 households: 135 Co-tu households, 148 Ta-oi, 25 Kinh and one Bru-Van Kieu (Le Van Hoi, personal communication, December 2009). The Co-tu and Ta-oi are ethnic minorities in Vietnam but make up the majority in Hong Ha. People of Kinh ethnicity – Vietnam's majority ethnic group – comprise less than 10 percent of Hong Ha's population.

The livelihoods of many current residents of Hong Ha formerly depended on slash-and-burn cultivation and the use of natural resources from the forest. However, these agricultural practices are discouraged by current government policies, which promote sedentary farming methods. The Vietnamese government has promoted sedentarization policies for ethnic minorities since 1977, initially banning shifting cultivation and nationalizing the land and forest resources used by ethnic minorities. The policy was reviewed and a second resettlement policy began in 1990 for the purpose of improving the livelihoods of ethnic minorities (Shine 2007). Because livelihoods in Hong Ha depend almost entirely upon agricultural cultivation and the forest, government-sponsored changes in agricultural practices have made a large and sometimes adverse impact on village life. A great deal of once invaluable indigenous knowledge is being lost as a result of the shift to sedentary agriculture. That loss affects many aspects of domestic life, such as food, housing, clothing and family relations. According to Hirohide Kobayashi, who researched living environments in Paring village in Hong Ha, local ethnic minorities no longer live in traditional houses but now live in dwellings similar to those of Kinh people (Kobayashi et al. 2008: 2640-2643). In fact, there are only two traditional houses on piles built by the elders in Paring village in Hong Ha.

### **3.2. Preparation for building a traditional community house**

Before constructing a traditional community house, the project team sponsored a series of group discussions to examine the needs and assess the potential of local people in December 2006 and January 2007. Project members facilitated 30 group discussions with the participation of local people in all five villages of Hong Ha. The group discussions indicated that most people were interested in building a community house in a traditional architectural form on stilts and using local materials. Project members had initially suggested that villagers

build a hybrid-styled house using local materials, based on architectural research carried out in July 2006. Project members had prepared a draft design for “a hybrid structure using bamboo pillars, a bamboo roof-truss and adobe brick walls for strong wind-resistance, as a project villagers could build themselves” (Kobayashi 2006: 52) based on prior research, and they presented this idea to the villagers. After a heated discussion, the project members decided to respect the local support for a more traditional form because the house would belong to the people and their enthusiastic involvement was crucial to the project’s success. Project members then proposed that the house should be of traditional form, built from natural materials and constructed according to the indigenous knowledge of the elders. However, not all local residents agreed. Although some elders strongly supported traditional architectural forms, some Paring village residents wanted to include modern elements in the house’s design. The issue of construction materials was discussed repeatedly. The villagers debated whether they should use natural materials local to Hong Ha or modern materials, how they should divide financial and labor contributions among local residents and how broken materials would be replaced in the future. In response to this last point, some people suggested using modern materials to create a house in the traditional shape. One month after the July workshop, the project members and local residents finally agreed to build a “traditional” community house that did not use modern materials.

The location of the house was another topic of heated discussion among local residents. The first suggestion was a site in Paring village near a research station built by GSGES and HUAF, surrounded by forests and a stream. However, residents of the other four villages claimed the community house should be built at the center of Hong Ha near the government offices and schools in Pa-hi village because it would be easier for residents to stop by for activities or meetings and share in the benefits of the house. After the discussion, the people of Paring village finally deferred to the Pa-hi suggestion. In the past, the site of a community house was decided by the hamlet leader and elders after conducting several rites, such as putting an egg in the middle of split bamboo and placing a snail into a hole divided into two (Nguyen Xuan Hong 2008: 128). In the case of Hong Ha, however, the site was chosen for its convenience.

After reaching basic agreement on house style and construction, a management board for the community house was established for the purpose of guiding the process of construction, as suggested by project members. The board initially comprised representatives of the People’s Committee (an executive local administrative body that operates at the provincial, district and commune levels) and delegates from mass organizations such as the Farmer’s Union and Women’s Union (groups established to transmit government policy to residents at the grassroots level and to convey local residents’ voices to the government). Residents and elders of the five villages were neither informed nor involved. This reflects the change in leadership roles in Hong Ha in recent decades. It is no longer the village elders but the leaders of the People’s Committee of Hong Ha and mass organizations that have major political and

social responsibility for communal affairs. The project members suggested the village elders be invited to join the management board to encourage the participation of the elderly, who had much traditional knowledge and experience to pass on to younger generations. In the opinion of project members, traditional house construction represented a perfect opportunity for transmitting traditional culture from old to young in Hong Ha commune. As a result, seven elders from all five villages were approved as members of the board and they began their role by supervising the whole process and facilitating the participation of local residents.

Discussions among local residents and between villagers and project members were held for more than six months, from December 2006 to June 2007, in order to achieve a shared understanding. The project members' perspectives, based on architectural research, differed initially from those of local residents – something that became apparent in group discussions held in December 2006. In many instances, outside experts force their beliefs, ideas and expectations on local people. In this case, the experts designed a house that would be resistant to natural disasters, based on one day's research of local materials and indigenous knowledge. However, they did not fully understand local realities, including the types of traditional houses used in the past and the way to build a house using resources currently available. The project members in this case were sensitive to the fact that development assistance often ends up with the reluctant involvement of local people and without the use of local knowledge or skills. Here they eventually opted to respect local residents' wishes and ideas. Although many projects are adversely affected when the ideas of local residents and external project members come into conflict, in this case, both sides stated their ideas, listened to each other and finally reached an acceptable compromise through group discussions and workshops.

### **3.3. The collection of materials**

To build the community house, the first step was to collect the materials. Materials traditionally used for building in Hong Ha include timber for the pillars, beams and floor joists of the main structure; various kinds of bamboo, used for rafters, purlins and floors; rattan and bamboo for rope and palm leaves for thatching the roof and substructure. Local residents are required to obtain a permit from the A Luoi Forest Management Station to carry out logging of timber in protected and primary forests, which together account for almost all the forest cover in Hong Ha. On March 14, 2007, Hong Ha commune submitted a logging permit request to A Luoi Forest Management Station and received a permit one month later.

The management board began by assigning a group of youths to collect materials for the main structure. The young men had the physical strength to go deep into the forest with their buffalo and stay several nights to log sufficient timber. Members of the management board, especially elders, carefully instructed the youths on the type and number of trees that should be collected, their likely location and ritual ceremonies relating to the process of cutting timber. This took into account traditional Co-tu taboos surrounding the selection of forest locations and specific trees to harvest. Logging is prohibited in areas thought to be

inhabited by evil spirits. Traditional beliefs also forbid the logging of trees with large trunks, those covered with vines, those stricken by lightning and those containing huge ant nests, all of which are thought to harbor evil spirits (Nguyen Xuan Hong 2008: 129). However, in this instance, the residents of Hong Ha were forced to disregard many of these traditional concerns due to the scarcity of building materials.

Since the collected timber was highly valued, this work was paid according to the number of long or short logs collected. It took a total of three months to assemble all the timber, much longer than expected. Collecting wood for the substructure was easier than collecting materials for the main structure because the local people could often find it near their homes. The management board assigned each village a role in collecting the same quantity of materials for the substructure and all 300 households in the commune contributed rattan and bamboo over a period of four months. Collection methods depended on the decisions made at village meetings. Residents of Arom, Can Sam, Pa-hi and Con Tom villages divided obligations equally among all of the households (excluding those who were vulnerable or disadvantaged). On the other hand, residents of Paring village divided their contribution according to the capacity and willingness of each villager. For example, physically strong young people, who knew where to collect rattan, were asked to collect it while older people were placed in charge of processing the material at home. In this way, all households contributed to the work to some extent in Paring village. Decisions were taken by vote and each person was given a task that reflected his or her capabilities.

One interesting aspect of the process of assigning contributions at the village level was that local people decided during meetings that vulnerable households, such as those with elderly or handicapped members, would not be assigned any work or were given simple tasks such as processing rattan at home. Project members from outside the village would not have been able to identify vulnerable households or decide how the vulnerable could contribute to the work. This shows how the participation of local residents in decision-making is critical, since it facilitates the expanded involvement of many types of people. The project members' role during this period was to record the collection process, describing the materials and amounts needed for construction and identifying where and how local residents obtained the materials. As the project members were less familiar with their surroundings than the local residents, they played a more constructive role by documenting events. This contribution may be very important in the future, especially for ethnic minorities who lack photographic and written documentation.

Table 1 shows the total collection of materials for the community house, including the types of material used to build the main structure and substructure, the quantities of material collected, the period over which collection took place, the financial contributions from the project and the contribution of labor by local residents. Local residents made great efforts to collect the materials necessary for the house. It took much longer than expected because of the scarcity of natural resources. Although not completely deforested, timber has become

Table 1. Total contribution of main materials for building a community house

Materials	Amount	Collection period (in 2007)	Contribution	
			Financing by project (VND)	Labor allocation during the collection period (number of people/buffalo)
<i>Kien</i> (a kind of timber) for pillars	18 main pillars 20 sub pillars	May 2-July 2	47,600,000	142 laborers (25 buffaloes)
<i>Cho</i> (a kind of timber) for cross beams and poles	4 m <sup>3</sup>	May 25-July 21	21,800,000	65 laborers (12 buffaloes)
<i>May</i> (rattan) for ropes	5,000 ropes	June 5-6	0	100 laborers
<i>Giang</i> (a kind of bamboo) for roof ropes	250 ropes	June 5-June 30	0	25 laborers
<i>Lo o</i> (a kind of bamboo) for floors, rafters, walls, etc.	250 strips	June 5-July 30	0	50 laborers
<i>Lo o</i> for purlins	300 strips	June 5-July 5	1,650,000	15 laborers
<i>La co</i> (a kind of fan palm) for roof	8,000 leaves	August 1-15	0	287 laborers
<i>May heo</i> (a kind of rattan) for round beams	50 strips	June 5-July 5	0	15 laborers
Timber for round beams	2 logs	0	0	2 laborers

scarce in the forests of Hong Ha because of illegal logging and valuable wood could only be found in very deep forests. People would have been able to find large and old trees easily in the past but the most valuable wood, especially that used for the main pillars, is often logged so these days only smaller trees can be found, even in the deep forest.

### 3.4. Building a traditional community house

After the materials were collected, local residents started to process the logs for the pillars following calculations by an elder.<sup>7</sup> Most local people used motorized saws and planes to save time and, as a result, the processed timber was straighter than it would have been if it had been worked using traditional methods. In the past, villagers used axes, knives and bush hooks for processing logs. Some elders used their own axes to process and finish the logs because they believed that they could not show their deep devotion to the community house if the processing of logs took only a short time.

Construction started on August 14, 2007 after the ritual ceremony called *choh dong* in Co-tu, in which prayers were made to the *yang* or spirits, asking them for their help in constructing the house safely. The construction process required more technical skill and more intensive work over a shorter period of time than the process of collecting materials. For example, 80 people helped on the day the pillars were fixed into the ground (left, Figure 3). The primary participants in the building process were local volunteers, elders and carpenters. On a typical day, 30 or more people from all the villages volunteered to do all kinds of work, from processing rattan to weaving bamboo for walls, erecting pillars and clearing brush from the site. Many men and women of all ages worked every day for no payment.



Figure 3. Building a community house: fixing pillars into the ground (left), roofing (center), installing the central pillar (right)

Three local carpenters, whose expert skills were essential to the building process, were paid an allowance. They mainly carried out skilled construction work, such as connecting the main beams and working at the top of the roof, and they supervised the volunteers in the construction process (center, Figure 3). Three elders also came to the construction site on a regular basis to monitor the work and share their traditional skills and knowledge. Some of the more agile elders climbed on to the roof to help work on the more difficult parts of the building. Several technical discussions about building methods were ongoing at the construction site. For instance, there were different ideas about roofing the main part. The carpenters and younger people thought they should roof with a set of leaves from the bottom to the top. However, in the end, the residents roofed from the top, following the guidance of elders. In this way, the construction served as an opportunity for young men to learn traditional architectural methods from their elders. Mr Ho Van Phin, then 32 years old and a leader of the Youth Union, said at a November 18, 2009 group interview: “While building this community house, the elders taught me how to make one side of the gable of the house and then I made the other side on my own.” According to commune leaders at the same interview, this project taught 24 young men in Hong Ha the skills to build a traditional house.

Members of the management board came to the construction site every day to steer and monitor the process and some of them helped with the construction. Project members came by every day to record the building process using video and still cameras. Furthermore, a local audience, consisting of residents from the commune not involved in building, also stopped by the site to watch and encourage the participants. The community house is located between several schools and commune office buildings at the center of Hong Ha so many people could follow the building process. After the construction of the main building was complete, the symbolic pillar was installed at the center of the house (right, Figure 3). This process held deep meaning, signifying that construction had come to a close.

### **3.5. Ritual ceremonies**

During the logging and building, the elders’ role was critical because they were the only people who could remember building a traditional house. Their knowledge was particularly important in organizing the relevant ritual ceremonies, for which they were assigned responsibility. Five ceremonies, each conducted by the elders, marked the material collection

and house construction processes: 1) *xiec tac dang* in Co-tu, held at home before the departure of the timber collection party, 2) *i xiec* in Co-tu, held before cutting timber in the forest, 3) *aroh along*, held in front of all the collected logs, 4) *choh dong*, held on the first day of construction and 5) *pa chien dong* in Co-tu, held to open the house. Each ceremony has its own meaning and knowledge of the practices involved has been passed down from older generations. As the house took shape, the ceremonies became increasingly elaborate, perhaps reflecting the growing excitement of residents and their sense of receiving support from Hong Ha's invisible spirits of nature. In this way, the ceremonies helped local residents become increasingly connected to each other and their surrounding environment.

### **3.6. Maintenance and management**

Figure 4 shows the finished community house, which was completed in September 2007. After the buffalo-sacrifice pole was erected in front of the house, a two-day opening ceremony, called *pa chien dong* in Co-tu, was carried out on September 14 and 15 (see Figure 4). On the morning of the second day, a buffalo that had been bound to the pole was sacrificed to the gods and local residents celebrated the inauguration of the community house. In the afternoon, more than 300 local residents, the secretary of the People's Committee of A Luoi district, the presidents of Hue and Kyoto Universities, the rector of the Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry and 20 university researchers joined the opening ceremony. Many female elders in traditional clothes, who were not often seen during the construction period, joined the ceremony and danced inside and outside the house. According to local residents, this ceremony was one of the most significant events for ethnic minority residents in Hong Ha since the post-war liberation in 1975.

Since it opened, the community house has been managed by local residents and interventions by project members have been greatly reduced. The most important objective is for local residents to maintain and manage the community house on a long-term basis. A survey based on three group discussions was conducted in November 2009, more than two years after the house was completed, for the purpose of monitoring the use and management of the house. The discussions involved commune leaders, village leaders and elders. The commune leaders' group consisted of representatives of the People's Committee, Youth



Figure 4. Completed community house and opening ceremony

Union, Women's Union and the Department of Culture and Information of Hong Ha, who were in charge of managing the house, as well as the former members of the management board that supervised the building process. Five village leaders, including a representative from each village, were asked to assess how residents from each village made use of the house. The elders were also asked for advice on and suggestions for appropriate use and maintenance, based on their experience. It was found that the community house had been used frequently for activities such as training, official meetings and cultural parties and that it was operated by young leaders, including the Youth Union and the Department of Culture and Information of Hong Ha. As for maintenance, those using the house typically clean up the interior and the members of the Youth Union and the Department of Culture and Information keep the house in good condition, cutting grass outside, washing mats and cleaning the house once every one or two months. The house is frequently smoked when users light fires for cooking and, in the winter, for warmth. The Youth Union is in charge of repairs and maintenance. The local leaders believe the house has generally been maintained well over the past two years and they plan to mobilize local people if large-scale improvements become necessary in the future.

In the survey, the elders also shared their concerns about damage to the house. Damage to parts of the roof caused by a typhoon in September 2009 should have been repaired immediately, they said. Their experience has taught them that if the damaged parts are not repaired, the house will not survive long term. In the past, when some parts of a traditional house were damaged, the users repaired it immediately. If large-scale replacement of the entire roof or the beams is necessary after many years, all the residents of the village must contribute their labor. In the past, an elder living in a traditional long house – usually the oldest man in the village – would call a meeting to discuss repairing the house and family members would allocate the tasks. To replace large parts, such as the roof of a community house, one elder from each long house would join a village meeting and they would decide how to go about it. In this instance, some elders suggested the necessity of more frequent cleaning and smoking to keep the house in good order in the long term and they emphasized the stronger leadership role that elders used to perform in the past.

The elders' concern about monitoring the use of the house reveals the continuing evolution of the local leaders' role. Although the community house is managed by younger leaders in their 30s and 40s, the elders were responsible for managing the community house in the past. According to the elders, one of them was made responsible for everything relating to house construction and management. Such changes in local leadership have resulted from the political and social transformation of Vietnam in recent decades. After the Vietnam War, the central government set up the commune as an administrative unit. The head of the People's Committee in each commune, together with the local secretary of the Communist party and heads of mass organizations at the commune level, took charge of political and social issues. The elders' role changed as a result. However, they are still considered experienced leaders,



who possess a knowledge of culture and traditions, and they were important actors in the rituals held at each stage of the community house construction process.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The theme of this paper is the traditional community house of the Co-tu ethnic group in central Vietnam. The first section details the current state of Co-tu community houses. In the past, most Co-tu villages maintained a community house as a place for meetings, leisure activities and cultural ceremonies. Historically, Co-tu villagers built their houses using expertise and indigenous knowledge handed down over generations. However, many governmental and non-governmental organizations are becoming involved in the construction of community houses as part of efforts to assist ethnic minorities. Some of these houses have been constructed using local materials and indigenous expertise while others have traditional forms but have been built by external construction teams using modern materials. Co-tu community houses have greatly diversified in recent years, making it difficult to achieve a clear understanding of either traditional houses or current conditions.

The second section presents a case study of a community house constructed in Hong Ha commune, Thua Thien Hue province. It illustrates the process of traditional house construction, including preparation, collection of materials, construction, management and related ritual ceremonies. Each stage poses its own challenges and lessons, revealing the complexity of building a traditional community house. During the preparation period, it became clear that the project members, outsiders and local residents held differing opinions about the building and use of the house. Local residents expressed well-founded concerns about the availability of natural resources for building the community house in Hong Ha. Another issue was the evolving role of leadership in building and managing the community house – young leaders assigned by governmental organizations took a leading role even though the expertise in construction and management was provided by many village elders. This raises concerns about the future of traditional community house construction when the current elders are no longer able to contribute their expertise.

Ethnic minorities in Vietnam have experienced a period of rapid change and traditional practices, such as building traditional Co-tu community houses, are becoming increasingly challenging. This raises questions about the future of the traditional community house that cannot be answered by this paper, which explores the current state of community houses in general and from a case-study perspective. However, the case study suggests that it is critical to incorporate the opinions and wishes of local residents when deciding on construction of a community house. It is arguably more time efficient for assisting organizations to circumvent the discussion process and bring in an external construction team and use modern construction materials. Whether the house being built is traditional or modern, however, the most important consideration is the kind of house the local residents want and how they can

build and manage it themselves. The orientation and planning of a community house needs to be worked out through continuing and inclusive discussion with local people.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the literature, traditional Co-tu community houses are variously categorized according to height of residential topography, the architectural form of the building and the interior decoration (Nguyen Xuan Hong 2008: 119). However, the most common features are described in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The Co-tu ethnic group has its own language, which is different from Vietnamese. Both Vietnamese and Co-tu words are italicized in the text and Co-tu words are identified with each use.

<sup>3</sup> In some places, Co-tu people do not have a community house but the village features several long houses for extended families. Several references describe this kind of settlement and Le Anh Tuan considers this type to be the original form of a Co-tu village. In the past, before community houses existed, Co-tu villages comprised just one extended family living in one or two long houses. After that, the people started to live separately in small houses on piles and built a community house at the center of the village to foster greater village unity (Le Anh Tuan 2002).

<sup>4</sup> There are seven villages in Thuong Nhat commune. Construction of community houses was supported by ADB in five of them – Lấp, A Tín, Hóp Hòa, Ta Rin and Ta Lu (constructed in 2007). Two other community houses, in La Vân and A Xách villages, were built with World Bank support in 2003.

<sup>5</sup> A Japanese NGO has taken groups of 20 to 30 Japanese visitors to this house seven times to watch performances of traditional dance and to taste local food. During the tour, they also visited a waterfall near the village, travelling there by bicycle.

<sup>6</sup> The GSGES-HUAF project, Enhancing Community Resilience and Livelihood Security to Cope with Natural Disasters in Central Vietnam, ran from September 2006 to August 2009 after three years of exchange by scholars and students of the two universities. This project was implemented by project members representing various disciplines from both universities. For the duration of the project, the author resided in Hue full time and coordinated efforts between Vietnamese and Japanese team members when the latter visited Hue to contribute ideas and expertise to the project.

<sup>7</sup> The indigenous method of measurement of each construction part is recorded in Kobayashi and Iizuka's research on "Indigenous construction technology of Co-tu minorities in Central Vietnam – case study of a traditional community house in Hong Ha commune, Thua Thien Hue province" (2010).

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